



MUPPE

Brian Henson has inherited a major legacy left by his ingenious father, Jim Henson. He has taken over his father's company and now makes his directing debut on *The Muppet Christmas Carol* which is still entertaining movie goers across the country. Brian spoke to Paul Fischer from London.

Brian Henson was a puppeteer working for Jim Henson Productions, when his father tragically and prematurely died, turning Brian's world into chaos. At that time, there were no immediate plans for him to follow his father's footsteps.

"My father's death came as such a shock, in that it was very untimely, because he was always so fighting fit and always the healthiest man I ever knew. I was a puppeteer and performance co-ordinator for the company, and I guess I was fortunate that having had the same grounding as my father, his early death meant it was apparent that it made sense for me to carry on the company."

As such, Brian supervised and helped develop numerous projects initiated by his late father, including the hit TV series *Dinosaurs*, but the Muppets lay dormant for a while, so it was decided to bring them back to the big screen as they've never been seen before, thus *The Muppet Christmas Carol* was born.

And why this particular story? "Because it's so wonderfully absurd," Henson explains. "If we were to produce an original film idea that was a ghost story and had a very dramatic story, because we felt we wanted to work with that sort of dynamic, I think the audience would go see the movie and think: this is very odd for the Muppets to be doing this.

"So I think what drew us to *Christmas Carol*, was that is was a dark and sinister world, and one that was scary, and we felt that here was a piece that makes absolutely no sense at all for the Muppets to do, and therefore won't it be wonderful to do that."

While there's much of the Muppet comedy in the movie, Henson points out that it was never his intention to satirise the story. "We did it with great care. We wanted to keep the Dickens perfectly intact, and yet have the Muppets do their thing."

Having decided to cast Michael Caine in the pivotal role of Scrooge, "who had to take it seriously and not be a Muppet amongst the Muppets", the next question was: which of the Muppets were to play which of the Dickensian characters.

Henson admits that there was a bit of in-fighting amongst the Muppets, saying that "Piggy was a little upset she didn't have a bigger part, and I think she was a little worried that Dickens was somewhat sexist". But she finally does get to play Kermit's wife and be the mother of his children, I point out.

"That's right, and in the end I think that's what convinced her that it would be all right, that she could be married to Kermit and that she could have kids."

Brian is proud of his first directing achievement, as he should be. "It was a tough

film to make, but everyone had a great time doing it, especially Michael Caine who interacted so beautifully with the Muppets."

At a time when family movies are finding it tough, *The Muppet Christmas Carol* is doing very strong business, and Henson hopes that they'll return to the big screen within the next two years, "probably in another really absurd world, like a western or science fiction story".

As to the present, Henson's company is involved in a number of exciting projects, including a screen adaptation of the Steven Sondheim musical *Into The Woods*, another television series called *Dog City*, "that's a mixture of animation and puppetry", and a new live-action film version of *Pinocchio* "which is being directed by Francis Ford Coppola".

In all, the legacy of the extraordinary Jim Henson, who left us a wonderful world of muppetry and fantasy, lives on in a remarkable son who has managed to fill his father's shoes with creative perfection.



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